

[By Chris Garofolo](#)

U.S. Rep. Peter Welch has signed a bipartisan-sponsored letter to Pres. Barack Obama calling for the complete funding of the nationwide heating program.

Welch, a Vermont Democrat, is one of 103 House members urging Obama to fully fund the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program in the president's budget, which is scheduled for release within the next few weeks. The measure received mainly Democratic support, but 10 Republicans from states in the Northeast also signed on.

Representatives pushed for at least \$4.7 billion in LIHEAP funding, the level it was funded at in fiscal 2011. The funding was cut by 24 percent to \$3.47 billion nationwide with Vermont's contribution down to \$19.5 million thus far in fiscal 2012 from \$26 million the previous year.

"LIHEAP helps to ensure that people do not have to choose between paying their energy bills and paying for food or medicine," according to the letter. "Moreover, the funds invested in LIHEAP help to stimulate the economy, generating \$1.13 in economic activity for every dollar in benefits paid, according to economists Mark Zandi and Alan S. Blinder."

In an interview with the Reformer, Welch said LIHEAP is a critical lifeline for low-income Vermonters and the funding is needed now more than ever with a tough economy and rising fuel costs.

"Those of us who signed this letter, Republicans and Democrats, know that folks can't control the coming and going of winter. And we want to maintain at least the 2011 funding, that \$4.7 billion for the country and \$26 million for the state of Vermont," he said.

"In some ways it reminds me of Irene," Welch added, referring to the Aug. 28 tropical storm that devastated the state. "When we made our case in Vermont for assistance, there were 54 other congressional districts where their citizens had been hammered by Irene and cold weather has

no partisan preferences so if you're getting cold in your community, Republican or Democrat, you got challenges and I'm hoping we find that bipartisan spirit that we had during Irene to maintain fuel assistance for folks who need it."

New Hampshire Republican Charles Bass also advocated for sufficient funding for LIHEAP, calling it a vital program for many Granite State families struggling to pay high heating costs during the winter.

"There are many priorities that the federal government must fund, but I believe we can meet our needs in a fiscally responsible manner," Bass said. "We can provide the services people need at a price we can afford, and that's why I joined my colleagues in urging the Administration to fund the program at last year's levels."

LIHEAP is the main federal program offering low-income households, veterans and seniors help with their energy bills. The program not only provides assistance during cold winters in northern states, but also for more southerly states on hot summer days.

Nearly 9 million households have received program funding, a 54 percent increase from 2008.

At this point, supporters of the LIHEAP measure have not released recommendations on where the additional funding could come from in the president's budget.

Said Welch: "There's lots of different ideas where it could come from. In my view, the Pentagon is over-funded, that's an obvious place for me, but there's probably many different opinions about where it could come from. My view is first we have to agree it's necessary and then second, we can figure out how to pay for it through practical options."

Welch, along with Sens. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) and Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), is co-sponsoring legislation to provide additional LIHEAP funding to at least match last year's total.

